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ABSTRACT

This series of newspaper articles evaluates North Carolina's schools and establishes a relationship between the state's rural poverty and low student achievement levels. Test scores in 1988 are consistently low in all but four of the poorest rural counties. Small schools are disappearing from rural areas. Large schools can offer students more courses and activities, but they tend to alienate students and to generate higher dropout rates. Rural schools tend to draw from larger areas, and no longer serve as a social center for the community. Rural teachers observe lowered student motivation. Schools have tried a variety of strategies to motivate students to read and boost their self-esteem, but the task is difficult. Teachers say when standards are raised, students generally fold rather than buckle down. Relatively few rural high school students go on to college. North Carolina's Basic Education Program increases the investment in rural schools, but fails to improve the situation. Teen pregnancies, suicide, and other social problems usually associated with urban areas are appearing more often in rural systems. Rural teachers often work harder for less pay. One school is experimenting with new strategies, including: structural reorganization; teacher-developed curricula, grade-level alterations, schedule changes, computer-assisted courses, and interdisciplinary approaches. (TES)

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A POOR HARVEST: N. C.'S RURAL SCHOOLS

A reprint of articles published March 26-28, 1989

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER

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The News and Observer
Raleigh, N.C.
A reprint of articles published March 26-28, 1989

A poor harvest: N.C.'s rural schools

Poverty, achievement intertwined

By BILL GRAVES
Staff writer

Sylvia C. Best can gaze into the eyes of her 28 kindergarten students at Warsaw Elementary School in Duplin County and see the future of Eastern North Carolina.

In the restless eyes of at least half her class, she sees students lagging behind and bound for school failure, possibly the first dropouts of the next century.

Among them are seven students repeating kindergarten, two Hispanic children who cannot speak English and others dressed in hand-me-downs who borrow food from classmates and like to squirm on the floor. Three-fourths of her students come from low-income families.

In more alert, comprehending eyes, she sees the other 25 percent of her students who come to school rested, with full stomachs, new clothes and a knowledge of numbers and the alphabet. They will succeed and go on to college or technical school. Most of them will never return.

Like most teachers in rural schools, Mrs. Best is paid less and has fewer resources than her colleagues in urban schools. Yet she teaches a larger number of disadvantaged students.

Her class is typical of rural schools in Eastern North Carolina, where most of the state's poorest school systems are found. With the exception of Durham City, these 39 systems — falling between the central Piedmont and the coast in a broad swath that wraps around the Triangle — are rural.

Visits to 10 schools in Halifax, Duplin, Scotland and Gates counties, and interviews with more than 150 administrators, teachers and students, found that poverty and achievement are intertwined as follows:

■ In all but four of the poorest 39 systems, the average student score on the 1988 California Achievement Test falls among the bottom 25 percent of the state's standings in at least one grade. The standardized exam is given in grades three, six and eight to all students in the state's 139 school systems. The average score for students in 14 of the 39 eastern systems never rises above the bottom 25 percent at any grade.

Income and achievement
The relationship between low income and test scores in North Carolina
Poorest county school systems based on students from low-income families
County systems with lowest California Achievement Test scores
Does not include city school systems
Based on information from N.C. Department of Public Instruction

■ More than two-thirds of the roughly 200,650 students in these school systems — as many as 91 percent in some — qualify for federally subsidized lunches offered free or at reduced prices. About half of the 114,100 students in another 11 of the state's Eastern school systems qualify.

The percentage of children who qualify for the lunch program is considered a good indicator of family poverty in a school district. A family of four must earn less than $21,553 a year to qualify for a reduced price lunch and less than $15,145 for free lunch. Based on those standards, all but seven of the poorest third of the state's school systems fall in Eastern North Carolina.

■ About 18 percent of the state's 1.1 million students attend these 39 poor school systems, but they account for about 30 percent of children who receive federally funded remedial help in math or reading. In fact, the average student in most of these schools systems, and the majority of students in some, qualify for the help, but all cannot be served because of limits in federal aid.

More than one in four of those who graduate from most of these schools and enroll in the University of North Carolina system will need remedial help as college freshmen. In 10 of these school systems, the proportion of graduates needing remedial help in college exceeds 40 percent.

■ In the 1987-88 school year, about 4,250 students dropped out of these schools and about 4,700 became pregnant.

"The old traditional system is not working," said Kenneth E. Brantley, who retired in December as superintendent of Halifax County schools. "We've got to have something different."

Bobby R. Etheridge, state superintendent of public instruction, and most other education leaders agree.

They are urging the General Assembly to free local schools from state regulations, which bind them to traditional approaches, while holding them accountable for boosting student achievement. Their aim is to give teachers the power and incentive to find better ways of teaching students.

"Let's decentralize," Mr. Etheridge said. "I think it is time for us to do things differently."

Some schools in Eastern North Carolina are experimenting with teacher-designed approaches. These stress parental involvement, individualized instruction and a more personal organization that keeps students in smaller groups — as they once were when most rural schools were small.

Small schools vanishing

The small, more intimate schools of a generation ago have nearly disappeared from North Carolina's countryside. Modeling their urban counterparts, the state's rural schools enclose hundreds of students in long, low brick buildings with flat roofs and cinder-block hallways.

At the end of World War II, more than 1,000 rural schools were scattered across Eastern

Staff photo by Bruce Whitehead

Teacher Sylvia C. Best with student at Warsaw Elementary

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Poverty entraps rural schools

Continued from page 1

North Carolina's poorest 38 rural school districts, including 230 one-room school houses and 251 high schools.

Today, with 20,000 more students, the region has only 374 schools, 73 of which are high schools. One-room schools are extinct.

"North Carolina has no rural schools," said Jonathan P. Sher of Chapel Hill, a nationally recognised expert on rural schools and editor and principal author of the book, "Education in Rural America." "What North Carolina has are standardised schools that just happen to be located in rural areas. . . . They are not small. They are not tied intimately with the community. . . . They end up being resource-poor, pale imitations of metropolitan schools."

Large schools can offer students more courses and activities, but they also tend to alienate students and have higher dropout rates. A recent study by the Institute for Educational Leadership Inc. in Washington concluded "large schools and classes lead students to feel anonymous, unimportant, disassociated with the activities and goals of school."

Scotland High, for example, serves 2,200 students from throughout the county and can offer courses in four foreign languages, robotics and theater production. But about 40 percent of its students — compared with a state average of 24 percent — get lost, find nothing that suits them, and quit before they graduate.

By contrast, Dr. Sher showed in a recent study conducted for the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association that small schools have smaller classes, are more personal and hold on to more students. He reported small rural high schools in Nebraska lost fewer than one out of every 10 students before graduation whereas larger schools in Omaha lost one out of every four. Further, 15 entire counties and 93 small rural school systems in Nebraska did not lose a single secondary student in 1986-87.

In North Carolina, consolidation has brought some rural students modern schools with carpeted libraries and computer rooms. But others still learn in older buildings with pipes running along hallway ceilings and radiators ticking along classroom walls.

Band students at Charity Middle School in Rose Hill file into a sagging, clapboard building with flaking white paint to practice in a breezy room with egg crates and carpeting tacked to the walls to improve acoustics. Plans are under way to replace it.

Sampson County has not built a new school in 20 years. 12 of its 17 schools are out of space, and the state has said seven schools should be replaced. Students at Weldon Elementary sit in classrooms built in 1903 and classified as substandard by the state. A new school is being built.

Motivation a problem

Because rural schools draw from larger areas, most no longer serve as the social center for a single community. Parent-teacher groups are foundering or have become defunct at many schools. Teachers complain that parents do not answer notes, come in for conferences about their children's progress or push their children to study, do homework and excel academically.

Educators say the failure of parents to make education a priority at home kills student motivation and undermines teachers' efforts.

"You can double the salaries of teachers, you can build a new building in every school in the Scotland County system, and you won't do anywhere near the good you will do if you give them two solid parents in every household," said James M. Tapp, principal of Carver Middle School in Laurel Hill.

But stable families with deep historical roots in the rural landscape are fading with the family farm.

Many students live with single mothers, grandparents or parents who work night shifts in local factories. About a third of the parents in the poorest 39 Eastern school systems have less than nine years of education. Only a fraction of rural students live with two parents who have completed college.

Many have never ventured far outside their counties. For Scotland County students at Pate-Gardner Primary School in Gibson, a stop light or police car is a rare sight.

"Our kids here don't go places," said Melba E. Harrell, science teacher at Charity Middle School in Duplin County. "In one class I had 13 kids, and none had seen the mountains. Only two had ever been to the beach. . . . How can they dream beyond their back door when they have never been anywhere?"

Teachers say low student motivation — more than low pay, long hours, scarce supplies or shoddy facilities — frustrates them most.

"You've got to send us a sponge instead of a rock," said Larry E. Howard, math teacher at Charity Middle School.

Schools try a variety of strategies to motivate students and boost their self-esteem. They offer group counseling, student-of-the-month awards and classes on values, choosing careers and avoiding drugs. They plaster their walls with student work, posters, goals and motivational slogans such as "Only your best is good enough."

Some have poured generous portions of their resources into libraries. Southeast Halifax High, for example, has a spacious, carpeted, computerized library with 11,859 books for 760 students, the finest library in the county. But educators say it is difficult to get students to read what they are assigned, let alone to read for pleasure.

"Television occupies a great deal of them," said Paul Britt, principal of Warsaw Elementary. "The greater percentage do not read that much."

Some teachers resort to video versions of literary works as well as "high interest, low ability" books and even pizza and candy to motivate students. Social Studies teacher Stanley B. Gelbhaar at Charity Middle School sometimes allows students to do drawings instead of reports.

"They can express themselves in a drawing a lot better than they can on a piece of paper," Mr. Gelbhaar said.

Teachers at Scotland High have begun teaching non-reading students "viewing skills" so they can watch television and movies with a critical eye.

"So many will never read anything after high school other than a magazine," English teacher Elizabeth M. Ferguson said.

'Geography is destiny'

Teachers say when they try to raise expectations, students often fold rather than buckle down. Michael W. Kegerreis, math teacher at East Duplin High near Beulaville, said he was shocked the first time he handed a sheet of story problems to his math students. A tap, tap, tap spread across the room like falling dominoes as students slapped their

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Staff photo by Dave Wiechec

Kindergartners in Sylvia C. Best's class prepare to learn the letter 't' by coloring turtles during one of her class sessions

The cost of poverty

Student achievement in the state's poorest schools.

School system	Percentage on free/reduced price lunch	3rd Grade CAT scores	6th Grade CAT scores	8th Grade CAT scores
Halifax	91.1	39	40	39
Fairmont	84.1	36	43	41
Weldon	83.0	40	36	36
Goldsboro	79.3	45	38	44
Northampton	78.5	47	31	42
Warren	78.4	54	40	43
Bertie	77.3	49	42	50
Hoke	77.2	35	41	46
Durham City	76.9	48	32	35
Rocky Mount	76.7	57	47	46
Robeson	76.6	51	42	37
Kinston	75.3	53	40	44
Red Springs	74.1	50	38	43
Lumberton	73.9	56	42	44
Hyde	72.6	58	50	46
Chowan	71.6	50	59	57
Saint Pauls	71.4	35	33	36
Jones	71.4	53	61	57
Tyrrell	70.0	38	65	51
Franklinton	69.7	51	43	48
Bladen	69.2	56	41	44
Perquimans	68.6	70	50	51
Columbus	67.5	59	49	44
Hertford	66.8	53	42	49
Richmond	63.6	56	52	45
Whiteville	63.0	46	48	55
Washington	62.7	32	46	52
Martin	62.4	53	56	50
Edgecombe	61.1	53	44	51
Scotland	60.9	45	32	44
Pender	59.4	54	50	45
Vance	59.3	49	48	44
Sampson	59.2	56	55	51
Pitt	59.1	54	48	51
Wilson	57.4	65	54	55
Greene	56.9	55	42	36
Duplin	55.9	49	55	52
Gates	55.9	72	49	47
Clinton	55.9	56	50	51
State		60	55	53
Nation		50	50	50

Source: N.C. Dept. of Public Instruction

Parents cope with daily life, dream of future for children

By JUDY BOLCH
Staff writer

GIBSON — These are the things Irene Patterson hopes for her four children:

That they will never have to get married to escape a home where a drunken relative rampages in the night with a shotgun.

That they will never stand by a conveyer belt waiting for chicken livers, hearts and gizzards to fall from giant chutes.

That they won't live out their days in Gibson, a Scotland County town without a pay phone, a supermarket or a clear-cut future.

Like the parents of many students at rural schools such as Pate-Gardner Primary, Irene Patterson knows that education is the best way to ensure her children never face these problems or others she has encountered. She also knows that a child's home may be as important as his school in determining what he learns.

Single parents who work. Single parents on welfare. Couples where both parents work. Each kind of family has its own problems as it attempts to turn the positive feelings into the dreams of tomorrow.

The Dunns

Pamela and Nicole Dunn are waiting for their mother to come home. Home is an upstairs apartment in a house across from the railroad tracks in Gibson. In the living room-kitchen, the dark shade on the single window is pulled, shutting out the rest of the world. The girls cannot see the gray afternoon sky that is threatening sleet.

Nicole, 9, is in the fourth grade at Pate-Gardner Primary, and Pamela, 17, is a senior at Scotland High 10 miles away in Laurinburg. They wait in the dim light from the unshaded bulb hanging over the television set.

Nicole is reading "Ghost Stories." She is reading the book just for fun, she says with a tiny smile that reaches out and wraps itself around a listener's heart.

Pamela instructs her sister, who's bouncing in hospitable excitement, to sit down. Pamela wants to go to St. Andrews College and become a child psychologist. Her SAT score was 740. Soon she will retake the college entrance test to see if she can raise that score.

It is 4:30 p.m. when Elizabeth Dunn comes in the door. From week to week, her schedule is uncertain. Each Sunday her hours are posted at Nic's Pizza & Chicken in Laurinburg where she is a cashier.

Some weeks she's on duty until 1 a.m. Then Pamela takes care of Nicole and cooks supper. But things are better than they used to be.

"I've just changed jobs," says Mrs. Dunn. "The job where I was at, I was working from 3 to 11 or 12 in the morning." Now sometimes, at least, she can be there to help Nicole with her homework.

Mrs. Dunn, 40, was one of nine children. Gibson High closed the year she finished 11th grade, and she never transferred. She got married, divorced, disillusioned.

Her voice is without inflection. Most of the time her eyes remain fixed on the TV set.

Sure, she says, "I would have loved to have done a lot more and a lot better. But like they say, everybody can't be rich. Over the years, I have learned to accept what I have. I'm one of those people who sort of lives one day at the time. I don't have a whole lot, but what I got I can say I got my name put on it."

As she talks, the sky outside grows darker, the air colder.

But in her warm little room, Nicole is happy. Tonight she will do her homework: spelling and health. Supper will be left-over spaghetti reheated in the kitchen alcove.

The school

Pate-Gardner Primary School seems very much like thousands of other schoolhouses scattered across America. Red brick. One story.

But the route to the school is less pleasing. Much of it is boarded up, broken out, tumbled down. A rusty cotton gin and tattered houses are pure Southern Gothic.

Once Gibson was a booming cotton town important enough to be on the lines for two railroads. But in 1989, poverty is the norm. Seventy-one percent of Pate-Gardner's 343 students qualify for

See PARENTS, page 4

Staff photo by Robert Thompson

Irene Patterson, shown with her children, says she wants to leave Scotland County: 'This is not a ghetto, but I want to get out. . . . I just want to be in a position to make me some money and take care of my four kids and travel.'

Students' scores lowest in poorest school districts

Continued from page 2

pencils down on their desks in defeat, refusing even to give the problems a try. He found the reaction so startling, he eventually videotaped it.

Claudia J. Hollingsworth formerly taught in Wake County and finds herself playing a "totally new ball game" as a fourth-grade teacher at Warsaw Elementary in Duplin County.

"I have some students who can't read at the first-grade level," Mrs. Hollingsworth said. "It really has gotten worse, I'd say, in the past four or five years."

Some students, of course, do excel in rural schools. More than 40 percent of Scotland High's graduates, for example, go on to college or some form of higher education.

But relatively few students seek challenging academic courses in rural high schools. Of the 700 students at East Duplin High, about 40 are enrolled in advanced English, 16 in calculus, 32 in physics and only one in third-year Spanish, the only foreign language offered.

Sometimes such offerings are limited by the demand for basic courses. At Southeast Halifax High, for example, remedial teacher Linda S. Hardy said students "are clogging up the basic courses, and we do not have enough students in the advanced courses to justify the teachers."

Most who do go to college have no plans to return to the countryside where they grew up. "Everybody is leaving and not coming back," said Eric L. Williams, 16, a college-bound junior at Southeast Halifax High.

And those who remain do not have enough education to attract the technological industries that offer high-paying jobs.

"Geography is destiny," rural education specialist Dr. Sher said in a recent report on the state's economy. "Children born in certain communities predictably will not have opportunities . . . equal to those of similar children who had the good fortune to be born in more favored communities."

BEP gets mixed review

The eight-year Basic Education Program, the state's chief effort to improve schools, has given rural schools more in its first four years than they ever have had before. For the first time, they have counselors, art and music classes and summer remedial programs.

But finding teachers for schools in the countryside, particularly at a time when the BEP is adding thousands of teaching positions, is becoming increasingly difficult, administrators say. The Washington County school system, for example, is still searching for a Spanish teacher for this school year as it wanes, Superintendent Robert J. Alligood said.

Many educators say that while rural schools need resources, the BEP will not rescue most of their struggling students. Mr. Tapp of Carver Elementary said it would make more sense to spend BEP money on preschool for 3- and 4-year-old children to ensure that all students begin school on solid footing.

"What good is drama if they can't read the script?" Mr. Tapp asked. "All of those enrichment activities are fine, but it is almost like putting the cart before the horse."

Last month, House Speaker Josephus L. Mavretic, D-Edgecombe, told the state's three education governing boards that the gap between rich and poor schools would remain even after the state ultimately increases spending by $800 million a year in 1993 to fuel the BEP.

"I suggest the State Board of Education look beyond the BEP . . . to a system which addresses the continuing inequities between our poorest rural counties and our urban centers," Mr. Mavretic said.

Dr. Sher also thinks the BEP will bring few changes. Like most reform efforts, he said, the program adds to what doesn't work, like replacing parts on a lemon car.

"What they are now doing will not work with these kids," Dr. Sher said. "They ought to feel hopeless, because it is hopeless. The confusion comes with the belief this is the only way to educate young people."

Educators are finding ways to reach disadvantaged students with schools that function like communities. These schools treat students as individuals, involve their parents and make connections between the classroom and the world children live in.

In these schools, all students learn — even those Mrs. Best now sees bound for failure.

Parents cope day to day, dream of children's future

Continued from page 3

free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch.

Gibson is the only town in the school's attendance area, but buses collect students 10 miles north and south, bringing together children from 17 small communities. A "community" may be five or six houses clustered together.

Pate-Gardner is a cheerful place, full of colorful posters, modern computers and happy chatter. But on a standard achievement test, its third-graders on average score higher than only 38 percent of other students in the nation. In Wake County that figure is 73 percent. And although many Pate-Gardner students make the honor roll, each is being graded only against others on his ability level.

Principal Anthony W. Sasseen can't help but wonder how much their home environments affect the students' schoolwork. Some 35 percent of them are from single-parent families. In another 35 or so percent of the homes both parents work. Ten percent to 20 percent of the children live with a grandparent, an aunt or an uncle.

Some of the children never have been out of the county. Many experience few of the after-school activities — music lessons, birthday [illegible] often occupy their urban peers.

"I really can't point a finger at the parents," says Mr. Sasseen. "It's not their fault. It's where they are in their lives. The parents love their children dearly and will do everything they can for their children. That's the catch phrase: 'everything they can.' "

In their fourth-grade health class today, Nicole and Kit Patterson, Irene's sparkly 9-year-old daughter, are playing a game to prep for a health quiz. "What can your dentist do to help you prevent cavities?" Kit is asked.

With a little prodding, she gets the answer. "Whew," she says.

Nicole, her face furrowed in concentration, also answers correctly.

Over in a fifth-grade classroom, Kit's brother Gregory, 11, is writing a math problem based on a newspaper ad for cars. His problem reads: "I have 100,000 dollars. But I wnan't 2 cars that cost. one is 2,280, 10,448. how much in all?"

Later, in the kindergarten, Dorothy Powell, 6, makes a lion puppet out of a paper bag. In the second grade, her brother, Nicholas, 8, is studying contractions. "Haen't," he tells the teacher, is his favorite.

The Powells

When Melissa Powell was 15 years old, she walked away from school and never looked back.

She was 3½ weeks into the 10th grade when a principal questioned whether she had been justified in missing school because of "granulated" eyelids.

"It made me mad," says Mrs. Powell. "I went to call my daddy."

Now Mrs. Powell, 28, is married, and mother to Dorothy, Nicholas and Christina, another Pate-Gardner student. She lives in an immaculate brown doublewide with white shutters. A gray parrot that growls like an alligator, six finches and a dog named Lady also call the doublewide home.

Mrs. Powell grew up in Gibson and at 17 married an area boy. He was 17, too. Now he works at a textile plant, and Mrs. Powell waits tables at Revel's Barbecue. She also bones the meat and wraps it up to send out to grocery stores. On a single day she may lift 1,600 pounds of barbecue, one pound or so after another.

Each day she comes home at 4 p.m. and shakes her brown hair out of the net her job requires. Her baby daughter, Dorothy, has brown hair, too. Long brown hair and a perky face that in profile resembles actress Sally Field.

A few weeks ago, Mrs. Powell passed her driver's license test on the fourth try. Now, even though her husband will be working, she'll be able to get to the school to see her daughter in an upcoming play.

[illegible]

"Not too many people get everything they want. . . . The oniest thing I ever wanted to do I ain't got there yet is go to Elvis Presley's mansion. I want to go see Graceland."

An Elvis clock hangs above the family's television. In the bedroom, a velvet picture shows The King in his famous white suit. And although Mrs. Powell hasn't made it to Graceland, she married a man named Elvis.

Like his wife, Elvis L. Powell, 28, quit school in the 10th grade. He works second shift, 4 p.m. to midnight, at the mill where his dad, for whom he is named, spent 27 years. His sister works there, too.

For 15 minutes out of every 25, Mr. Powell stands by a loom that ties 5,000 knots as it weaves fabric. When the loom is through with that task, he sets it up to start all over again.

Elvis Powell brings home $260 a week; his wife, $144. "It's hard to make it on that," he says. "What gets me is I make too much to get my kids free lunches."

Mr. Powell wishes he had more education so he could qualify for a better job.

"They could learn me how to fix the machine, but that's probably as far as I could go," says Mr. Powell, whose belt buckle reads "ELVIS" in shiny letters. "They've started bringing in college men to run the mill."

In the weave room, he can see cotton dust floating in the air. His father has the brown lung disease that sometimes follows a life in the mill.

"I'm looking for me and my sister to have it," says Mr. Powell. "Even if I knew I was going to get it, I wouldn't have no choice but to keep working there. That's all I know."

His daughter Christina, who's 10 and in the fourth grade, listens to the conversation.

What does she want to be when she grows up?

"Doesn't matter," she says.

The three Powell children get up at 6 a.m., and Chrissy fixes breakfast and school lunches. Mr. and Mrs. Powell get up a little later. By 7:30, they leave, Mrs. Powell headed to her job, Mr. Powell and the kids on the way to school.

By 8:05 he is home again. He vacuums almost every day, and the refrigerator holds a job list of each child's chores. He does most of the cooking. Today it's meat loaf, macaroni and cheese and lima beans. At lunch time he takes a plate to his wife. After school, the children help themselves.

Mr. Powell leaves for work at 3:30 p.m., and the children are alone until their mother arrives a half hour later.

"But they have got rules," he says. "I trust them to go by the rules, not to answer the door and things like that."

One of the rules [illegible] seating, a place for each child to stay during the 30 minutes the trio is without a parent.

Mr. Powell believes rules are important. He wants his children to finish school and have a good life, "better than what I'm having. But we're not hurting. They don't go lacking for nothing. Somehow it comes to us."

Meanwhile, he teaches his children the lessons he thinks they should learn: "To respect others. To treat them the way they want to be treated."

Chrissy chimes in again.

"And daddy," she says, "there's one more thing: Never take no drugs."

The Pattersons

At 6:30 a.m. Irene Patterson has been up for an hour caring for the child of a neighbor who leaves for work at 5:30 a.m.

Mrs. Patterson — whose nightshirt says "Don't Worry — Be Happy" — is busy. The washing machine is agitating; dinner's 10 pounds of gut-pink chitlins are thawing in the sink.

Her oldest son, Corrie, 13, is finishing eggs, bacon, grits and cheese toast. Brother Timothy, 12, not feeling well, is eating light. Gregory is attacking a bowl of cereal, and Kit is compiling a plate of bacon and hot pickled sausages. The younger children will eat breakfast again at school.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Patterson is signing report cards and putting Kit's hair into three braids trimmed with red balls.

Everything is under control. That's the way Irene Patterson, 33, likes it.

Mrs. Patterson is another native of the area. In the 11th grade she married to get away from home. After that, school didn't seem important. Now she feels differently.

Mrs. Patterson has worked hard. As a nurse's aide, she was making $4.94 when she took a job on the conveyer belt at the Perdue chicken plant in Rockingham. There she worked her way up to $5.70. But she never knew what time she would get home. If 80,000 chickens were killed, 80,000 chickens had to be processed. A job with indefinite hours, she decided, was not for a mother.

She wanted to improve herself: "I talked to people. They said go back to school."

In September she began to spend her mornings at Richmond Technical Institute, studying for her high school graduate equivalency degree. She's taken the test twice. The last time she failed the English section by just eight points. Eight points stand between her and the two-year nursing course she wants to enter this fall.

The Pattersons live in Gibson Village, a federal subsidized apartment project. Mrs. Patterson, who is divorced, gets $222 a month in government assistance. She gets food stamps, Medicaid and $55-a-week child support. When her 1988 income tax refund arrives, all four children will be treated to new sneakers.

Her home is modern, well-appointed and furnished with the spirit of hope.

Gibson Village, she says, is "not a ghetto, but I want to get out. I've got that dream of getting my own place before I get to be 40.

"I want to move to Fayetteville. I just want to be in a position to make me some money and take care of my four kids and travel. I want to go on a cruise, the Caribbean or anywhere. Just get me out of Gibson."

Staff photo by Robert Thompson

Melissa Powell with daughter Dorothy, 6: 'I've got a good life. Not too many people get everything they want.'

Scotland County's heavy investments failing to pay off

Scotland County plows more of its money into education than most North Carolina school systems, yet it reaps one of the state's poorest crops of students.

The county's heavy investment in its 7,714 students has failed to offset the cost of poverty that afflicts their families.

About 60 percent of the systems' students come from low-income homes with a scarcity of books, heavy doses of television and parents weary from working long hours for low wages.

Scotland County students on average score among the bottom 10 percent in the state on the California Achievement Test, a standardized test administered in grades three, six and eight.

In 1987, nine girls under age 14 and 186 under age 19 became pregnant in Scotland County, giving it the state's fourth highest rate — 121 pregnancies per 1,000 teens. About 40 percent of Scotland County students quit school before graduating, giving it the [illegible] dropout rate.

Because education lacks status in the home, educators say, many students have no motivation at school and slip behind.

At Scotland High School in Laurinburg, parents will pack the steep, cement bleachers towering over the sports field to watch their children butt heads in football or march with the 160-member Highlander band dressed in authentic kilts imported from Scotland. Yet only about a dozen parents showed up for the science fair this year at Carver Middle School.

Scotland's students are exposed to more in school than most of their peers in rural Eastern North Carolina because the county taxes itself heavily to give them more. The Public School Forum of North Carolina recently ranked Scotland seventh out of 139 school systems in terms of the effort it makes to support schools relative to its wealth.

Such efforts have made Pate-Gardner Primary school's 30-year-old building shine on the edge of Gibson, a small, dusty town choking on old empty buildings. The 240-student school is well maintained, has a computer room and provides a teacher's assistant and a computer for every classroom. A new wing includes a spacious, carpeted library. Students get daily Spanish lessons, two trips a week to a spacious carpeted library, and weekly lessons in art, physical education and music.

On a typical morning, Susan E. Mullis' combined class of kindergartners and first-graders reviewed words that began with U and S and to sing songs about other letters. They fanned out across the bright, well-supplied room to play games with letters, to build words out of wooden and magnetic letters, to listen to songs about letters and to type letters on an old typewriter.

Yet, for all of this exposure, letters and words fail to stick with many children at this school.

One in four of the students at Pate-Gardner repeat a year before they reach fifth grade.

"We're behind to begin with, and we're catching up all the time," said Anthony W. Sasseen, principal of Pate-Gardner.

At Carver Middle School in Laurel Hill, more than half of the 400 students in grades six through eight need remedial help. Eighth-grade social studies teacher Penny M. Craner says her students have no sense of how they fit into time and place. "They ask me what the Civil War was like," she said.

At Scotland High, Elizabeth M. Ferguson, who is Mrs. Craner's sister, uses a simplified radio play version of "Romeo and Juliet" to introduce her two low-level freshmen classes to William Shakespeare. "They cannot read the original text," she said.

The school system has tried a variety of remedial, drug prevention, sex education and citizenship classes to boost student self-esteem and academic performance, but to little avail.

"I don't know that it is necessarily getting any worse, but I don't see it getting better," said James M. Tapp, principal of Carver Middle School.

Despite Scotland County's financial commitment to education, two of its 14 schools need to be replaced, the high school needs a larger cafeteria and lunchroom, and other schools are becoming old and crowded, Superintendent John T. Jones said.

Central Elementary in Laurinburg is 70 years old. Carver, where students flow through high, narrow halls under exposed pipes, is beginning to show its 37 years with leaking roofs, clanking radiators and broken toilets.

Just four decades ago, when it had half as many students, the county had 23 schools, including six one-room school houses, a dozen schools with only two teachers and five high schools.

Today, all 2,200 high school students in the county file down the wide halls of Scotland High, a modern brick complex where teachers clip plastic identification tags to their shirt pockets.

Staff photo by [illegible]

Students at Scotland High hurry up and down stairs on their way to class

"A student is known by a number," biology teacher John O. McDonald said. "It is almost like the survival of the fittest in this type of setting."

Educators say that rural students tend to be better behaved than their urban peers but that the distinction pales in a big school such as Scotland High.

Fearing violence, some teachers and students have avoided the rest rooms at the high school in recent years. Fights were breaking out frequently.

That stopped this year when Malcolm F. Forde, a new principal, cracked down with tougher discipline policies. But while the school is more orderly, it also seems more rigid, impersonal, less fun, students say.

Scotland's strength lies in its rich curriculum. It seems to offer something for everyone, ranging from physics, chemistry, calculus and fourth-year French, for the college-bound to child-care, carpentry, food management, parenting and technical engineering for those seeking jobs or technical careers. It also has robust sports and band programs.

The school runs the largest home economics program in the state. Its food management students operate an in-school restaurant, and its child-care students run a preschool three days a week.

All students are required to take a minimum number of English, math, social studies and science courses, although they vary widely in rigor.

Shawn L. Bethea, 16, a junior, says she often studies four or five hours a night to maintain her "A" average in demanding college preparatory courses in English, history, geometry and chemistry. "I want to go to college, and the only source of help for me is a scholarship," she said.

But a school day for senior Rodney R. Pegues, 18, consists of English, a government class on minorities, courses in nutrition and school credit for working 18 hours a week in a dry cleaning store.

Eric B. Byrd, 18, a freshman dressed in black denim, has set out on the wide general track that runs between the college-bound course Shawn charted and the vocational route Rodney chose.

Eric hopes Scotland High will give him a ticket into the travel business. He wants to be a travel agent and live in Wisconsin, a state he became enamored of after writing a report in the fifth grade. He has never been there.

Eric earns average or above average grades in general courses, has light homework, resists having to take a foreign language and does not care much for science, English or reading, unless it is about sports or Wisconsin. He likes to spend his time talking to his girlfriend, listening to Elvis Presley and U2, the rock group, and watching television comedies and horror movies on video tape. Like most high school students, he wants wheels.

"I'm going to get a job this year because I'm going to get a car," he said.

– DEA CRAVEN

Urban woes spring up in Eastern N.C.

Problems take toll on students

By BILL GRAVES
Staff writer

Problems long considered the domain of urban schools have crept into the countryside of Eastern North Carolina where the promise of education eludes large numbers of disadvantaged students.

As the snow flies on one dreary December morning, students at Southeast Halifax High School leave early, but one 15-year-old girl awaits an ambulance. Cradled between two men holding her arms over their shoulders, she stumbles semi-consciously down the hallway, her head bouncing sleepily against her chest.

The principal flips through her journal, looking for clues to help explain her awkward attempt on her life with heavy doses of over-the-counter sleeping aids. A tall, husky teenage boy tells him, "She had family problems."

Michael has family problems too. A senior at Scotland High in Laurinburg, he is working full-time at a fast-food restaurant to help support his two children.

"They are from different mothers," he says during an interview in his parenting and child development class. "I give them each $30 a week."

On a cold, but sunny day at East Duplin High in Beulaville, a quiet overweight girl with short brown hair and a cheerful face sits alone on a brick bulkhead outside the school library. She is reading a book called "I Touch the Future" about Christa McAuliffe, the teacher who died in the Challenger space shuttle explosion. But she dares not look too far ahead in her own life.

"I keep to myself," she says. Last year in Florida, she failed most of her classes. Her brother died two days after birth, and "I didn't care about nothing," she says. Because of custody battles between her divorced parents, she says, she has attended schools in Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, and other states. She wants to go to college, but isn't planning on it.

"I figure if I can get out of high school," she says, "that is my goal now."

That is the short-range goal of many, if not most, of the 200,000 students scattered among the poorest schools of Eastern North Carolina.

These 39 school systems — nearly all small and rural — post the lowest test scores and enroll the largest proportion of disadvantaged students in the state. But they have the fewest resources.

Social problems so often associated with impoverished inner-city life have found their way into the tobacco and corn fields. There, as in the city, large numbers of families struggle against poverty and the sense of powerlessness it breeds. Their troubles often spill into the classroom.

The change in the social landscape is apparent to people like Rosa S. Stubblefield, who grew up in the region and now runs the in-school suspension program at Southeast Halifax High.

"As a country girl, I used to see that urban problems were not problems in the country," Mrs. Stubblefield said. "I do feel problems are now becoming universal. We have more mobility. We don't experience now the extended family we had. Some of these children are free to do whatever they want to do."

Although weapons and drugs seldom show up in rural schools, educators say they see plenty of the other faces of poverty — broken homes, illiterate parents, children with low self-esteem, teen pregnancy, even suicide. Teachers say they cannot do enough in 5½ hours of school each day to make up for what students are denied at home.

Although rural schools see a disproportionately large number of troubled students, they receive no more counselors and social workers than schools elsewhere. Halifax County, for example, has one social worker to serve its 6,597 students, most of whom are poor.

"It is just so overwhelming," said B. Maxwell Lancaster, the school system's assistant superintendent for instruction. "Two-thirds of [our students] need help."

At Carver Middle School near Laurel Hill, where about 60 percent of the students qualify for federal remedial help in math or reading, Principal James M. Tapp spoke with passion about cultural problems undermining rural education. A big man, with thin blond hair, he leaned forward in his office chair, his elbows on his knees, hands gesticulating.

"The greatest problem schools have goes back to the failing of our entire society," Mr. Tapp said. "We are not failing because we need more teachers or need new buildings or need more money; we are failing because of what society has become.

"Students are not getting leadership at home from their parents about the importance of school. . . . Both of them are working, they are tired, they don't have the time for kids."

Research has repeatedly shown a strong correlation between a child's academic performance and the wealth and education level of his parents. In a 1982 doctoral dissertation study of high schools in 77 rural North Carolina school systems, Stephen M. Schewel found that poverty had more influence than any other variable — including school size, resources or teacher experience — on student achievement.

Charity Middle School in Rose Hill illustrates his point. About half of the students belong to single-parent families, about half of them qualify for free or reduced-price lunches and about half lag behind their grade level academically, said Principal David E. Jordan.

Investing heavily in a school does not always produce returns in academic achievement because of the influence of poverty at home.

Halifax County, for example, was unable to make much of a difference in student performance when it poured more resources into Inborden Elementary, a 40-year-old brick school on the end of a dead-end street in Enfield.

The school's shops were converted into a roomy, if somewhat drab, library. The gym floors were refinished. The institutional green hallways were repainted in bright sky blue. Defunct outside drinking fountains were turned into white flower boxes.

The face-lift won the school accreditation from the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, an honor shared by only three of the 17 schools in the system.

The Basic Education Program, the state's major school improvement effort, brought more color to the curriculum too. Students now have a period of physical education, music, and art each week from specialists who roam school to school. Kindergartners take Spanish once a week.

These investments boosted morale but did little to raise student test scores. Inborden students' average scores on the California Achievement Tests last year dropped in every subject at every grade level except fifth-grade language and math, which both climbed slightly.

First-grade scores were especially bleak, with students scoring in reading on average at the 18th percentile of students taking the test nationwide, where the average is 50. The average first-grader scores below the 25th percentile, which the state uses as a cutoff mark to bar students from promotion at grades three, six and eight. Two thirds of the school's fifth-graders are a year or more below grade level in reading.

Few of these students, only 25 percent of them, live with both parents. About 58 percent of them live with single mothers, and others live with grandparents. Half of their fathers and 40 percent of their mothers have less than a high school education.

Teachers across Eastern North Carolina say the battle to raise test scores is being lost outside the classroom in troubled homes.

"We have babies having babies," said Linda S. Hardy, who runs a special remedial laboratory for students who fail the state minimum competency test at Southeast Halifax High School near Enfield. "Their parents can't discipline themselves. How do you expect them to discipline their

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Inability to interest students in school frustrates teachers

With the ring of the bell, Melba E. Harrell begins her day by firing questions at her seventh-grade science students at Charity Middle School in Rose Hill.

Standing straight with her hands in her black slacks, her curly hair brushed back from her face, she looks fresh and self-assured. She tells her students to gaze into their neighbors' eyes, and then strays from her lectern to flip the light switch off and on.

Pupils watch pupils expand and contract.

"So what is the light?" Mrs. Harrell asks.

"It is a stimulus," reply a chorus of students.

In this fashion, constantly reaching for concrete examples, Mrs. Harrell delivers a fast-paced lesson on the qualities of living cells. She explains how the cellular genetic blueprint of DNA — deoxyribonucleic acid — is replacing the fingerprint in criminology.

"DNA is as special as you are," she says. She then compares the nucleus to the captain of a ship. "It tells the cell what it is going to do," she said.

Several students are absent. A couple drift in late. Despite Mrs. Harrell's efforts, glazed eyes suggest some students have tuned out within 25 minutes. One boy yawns, folds his arms on his desk and lays down his head.

Mrs. Harrell says her lesson is largely lost on all but a handful of students. Most of them sit quietly, but for the most part, disinterested.

Teachers across Eastern North Carolina say that disinterest — more than low pay, scarce resources or long hours — frustrates them most. Even experienced teachers say they can't hold the interest of their students. But to keep students from repeatedly failing then dropping out, school systems continue to promote students to the next grade.

Many of Mrs. Harrell's seventh-grade students read at the fourth-grade level and have trouble understanding the textbook. Some cannot read the textbook at all.

"If they could read when they come to me, I could teach science," said Mrs. Harrell. "For some reason, some children are not learning to read. We can't have that many learning disabilities."

Like most secondary teachers, Mrs. Harrell makes an effort to teach the state curriculum to all students. But for students several grades behind, such attempts approach the absurd.

At Southeast Halifax High, Louise A. Robinson faces the challenge of trying to introduce Shakespeare to freshmen who still read at elementary school levels.

Less than 20 percent of the students taking Vance L. Herring's woodworking class at East Duplin High School can read a ruler.

Students in Michael W. Kegerreis' general math class at East Duplin High still are learning how to convert cups to pints and inches to feet.

Teachers say too many students drift through the halls in the state's eastern rural schools rudderless, passive, with no concept of how education will affect a future they seem unconcerned about.

When teachers try to raise expectations and push their students, they face what is tantamount to mutiny. Ms. Robinson said assigning her freshmen a short story to read over the weekend is an exercise in futility.

"When they come in Monday, 90 percent of them will not have read it," Ms. Robinson said. "It gets worse every year. Definitely worse. They get less motivated. They are less prepared to work."

Some educators, however, say teachers should be able to overcome these barriers.

"I think teachers who believe in themselves and believe in their kids will make exciting things happen," said Delma C. Blinson, director of the Rural Education Institute at East Carolina University.

Jonathan P. Sher of Chapel Hill, editor and principal author of "Education in Rural America," said that for teachers to demand students with more motivation is like doctors demanding patients who are not as sick or lawyers wanting clients with less guilt.

Still, Claudia J. Hollingsworth, fourth-grade teacher at Warsaw Elementary, said teaching a lesson was similar to offering students a nutritious glass of orange juice on a tray only to have them refuse to take it.

"It bothers me," Mrs. Hollingsworth said. "What are we going to do? We feel like we're failing. It hurts. It hurts awfully bad because these are my kids."

Some teachers go to unusual lengths to try to motivate their students. Mrs. Harrell made up a

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staff photo by Roger Woodard

Melba E. Harrell, a teacher at Charity Middle School in Rose Hill: 'If they could read when they come to me, I could teach science. For some reason, some children are not learning to read.'

Urban problems are springing up in rural schools

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children?

"Most of our kids who fail, do not fail because they can't handle it. They fail because they are out walking on the streets at 2 a.m. and not doing their homework. You can count on two hands the number of people who do not have the ability to achieve.

"We spend a lot of time boosting their self-image. We have a lot of self-image problems. They figure they are stuck in the backwaters of North Carolina. They are never going anywhere. There is nothing for them."

Most of what poor rural students see of the world glows in a television tube. Their homes are barren of books, magazines, newspapers, sometimes even telephones.

And when students often show up tired, teachers worry about how well they are supervised.

"I have kids come in here and say they watched four movies last night," said Larry E. Howard, math teacher at Charity Middle School. "That is the problem with education. It goes back to the home."

A student's self-description posted on a fourth-grade classroom wall at Charity sums up daily life for many rural youths. The student wrote he was a: "lover of pizza, my mother, TV; who feels tired when school starts, sick of home work, starved at lunch; who fears failing school; who would like to see my family all together."

Occasionally, problems reach tragic ends, as on one morning before school last year when an East Duplin High student shot and killed himself off campus in front of his girlfriend.

"We cannot solve all of society's ills, but they are brought to us," said John O. McDonald, biology teacher at Scotland High.

Schools try an endless variety of approaches to boost their students' self-esteem and motivation. Teachers in most schools line the hallways with student compositions, even when they are riddled with spelling and grammatical errors. Southeast Halifax High has started recognizing a student of the month.

Several middle schools offer classes on cooperation, values, drug prevention and sex education. Counselors set up group sessions with troubled students. Charity Middle School recently tried to spur student benevolence with "Fuzzy Wuzzy Day." Students were each issued a round, fuzzy ball to wear like a corsage and to give to a friend or to anyone who complimented them. Many students, however, did not want to part with their fuzzy wuzzies.

For all their efforts, poor rural schools have yet to find a way to stimulate an appetite for learning in most of their academically undernourished students.

"What the mind dwells on is what the heart is going to pursue," said Mr. Jordan, principal at Charity.

Many students mimic their parents by dwelling on materialistic goals — cars, stereos, clothes — even if it means sacrificing school work for long hours in a fast food restaurant or grocery store. As elsewhere, the service industry across Eastern North Carolina has grown dependent on high school students for its labor pool.

This is especially apparent at East Duplin High, which serves a relatively affluent district where most students come from working class, two-parent homes. More than half of these students drive to school in cars that often are the envy of their teachers — new Honda Accords, Buick Regals and Pontiac Firebirds fill the student parking lot.

"It is hard to tell a kid he needs to get a good education to have what he wants when he is driving a $30,000 car," said Rickie B. Houston, a math teacher popular with East Duplin High students. "It is hard to motivate a kid like that."

Teachers say students live in the present and rarely see a connection between school and the often troubled world they live in. With a comment about grammar, Eric B. Byrd, a ninth-grader at Scotland High School, summed up the attitude that teachers feel powerless to change.

"In the real world," he said, "they don't break down the sentence."

Teachers find many students are disinterested

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rap song to help her students memorise the elements in chemistry. Mrs. Hollingsworth tries melodrama and sometimes plays the part of a clown.

Teachers know these students are capable of learning. V. Anne Morton showed that in 30 minutes with fourth-graders at Inborden Elementary in Enfield. Ms. Morton only had to sing a Christmas song twice before students memorized it well enough to sing it on their own. They also quickly learned to play the song on their plastic recorders.

But Ms. Morton runs into frustration when she requires anything more academic of children. For example, she gave her students five questions and the answers and told them they would be quizzed on them the following week. The quiz was word for word as she had reviewed it, yet 40 percent of the students failed.

Even some bright students shun reading, avoid challenging courses, and are prone to quit rather than buckle down in the face of a tough academic problem, said Dr. Kegerreis, a former college philosophy professor who decided to try teaching high school math.

"They expect to be entertained," Dr. Kegerreis said.

And schools try to oblige them with stimulating displays, games, high-interest books and magazines, videotapes and film strips, vocational courses and work opportunities.

Entering most classrooms is like walking into a slick magazine. Nearly every inch of wall space is busy with color: cartoon shaped commas and quotation marks, balloons bearing the names of the colors, a train pulling days of the week across a wall, pictures of children with puppies, or words of warning — "You Miss School — You Miss Out."

At Carver Middle School, Lisa P. Burroughs offers students candy to participate in her grammar lesson. Up the hall, Brenda Johnson helps her eighth-graders review astronomy words with a game of Jeopardy.

Teachers say television is one of their biggest enemies, yet they often try to use the hold it has on students to teach a social studies lesson or expose non-readers to a literary work.

The librarian at Charity Middle School says television robs students of reading time, but as she talked about it, four eighth-graders in a low-level English class sat behind her watching a video version of a tale by the Brothers Grimm. Rather than reviving a student newspaper at East Duplin High, English teacher Gina L. Miller said she hopes to help students set up a school TV news program next year.

She also is trying to launch a literary magazine. But when she offered extra credit to solicit contributions from a class of some of her best achievers, she got only one entry.

In the past, Dr. Kegerreis said, performance was more important, and "you either got it or you dropped out."

But now schools strive to put high school education in reach of all students by lowering standards. Instead of giving all students an education, schools have settled for giving them the symbol of it — a high school diploma, Dr. Kegerreis said.

"We pass children basically on attendance," he said.

So the gap between students who succeed and and those who struggle widens as they move up through the grades. Most schools [illegible] various levels according to their academic ability. Charity Middle School, for example, has students grouped into seven different ability levels, at least half of which are below the grade level they are in.

By the time they reach high school, students at opposing poles of academic achievement move in different worlds. A sophomore might be a student capable of reading "Macbeth," programming computers and writing linear equations. He might also be a student who struggles to read a newspaper story, prints rather than writes cursive, and has not yet memorized the product of seven times nine.

The more ambitious college-bound student must do homework, sometimes several hours a night, to pass the more demanding courses he would take. The other can expect to pass and graduate as long as he shows up regularly for his classes.

You can see the difference at East Duplin High School near Beulaville. The stylishly-dressed, college-bound students gather each morning in the lobby while a rougher group dressed heavily in denim and leather hangs out in the breeseway.

You'll find Rodney M. Scott, 18, a senior who says he likes tennis, Stephen King novels and computers, in the lobby. He wants to study engineering in college and is taking classes in calculus, college-level English, advanced biology and Spanish.

A. Neal Matthews, 18, also a senior, spends his days with the breeseway crowd in the shops where you'll find students learning how to weld or replacing a starter in an old Chevy pickup. Neal takes two hours of agriculture, an hour of wood working, algebra and English. Since study hall is his last class of the day, he is allowed to leave school an hour early.

The large number of students struggling to keep up is limiting the opportunities for some students to surge ahead. At Southeast Halifax High, for example, some offerings such as advanced English have been reduced so the school could offer more basic sections for freshmen.

"We've had too many ninth-grade failures and have had to cut back on some of the special classes we teach," said Linda B. Seay, assistant principal.

Students sometimes pay a social price for their scholastic achievements. Unlike most students at Southeast Halifax High dressed in jeans and trendy sneakers, for example, Eric L. Williams, 16, a college-bound junior taking chemistry and French, wears black dress shoes, black slacks, and a light blue sweater. His clothes betray his membership in a small group of academic achievers who say they are sometimes branded "nerds" by the other students.

About five of them huddled around a table at lunch, gobbled their food and studied vocabulary words for their English class. Other students resent such earnestness, said Neil Meyer, 17, a junior and one of the few white students in the school.

Students with other ambitions spend their days in other ways. For example, East Duplin students who choose to work as staff assistants during their study halls move about the school all day, running messages and pushing dust mops. D. Kay Brown has about a dozen health occupation students who get course credit for spending part of their time working in a local hospital.

Vocational courses and cooperative work programs traditionally have been wrecking yards for students who crash in academic courses, and in many cases they still are, teachers said. But they do keep some students in school.

Neal said he missed a month of school at East Duplin last year and was on the brink of quitting. Were it not for his agriculture class, he said, "I probably wouldn't have made it." Now he wants to get more specialized schooling in animal science.

Tommy R. Locklear, 19, a senior at Scotland High, found his salvation in food services. He was withdrawn, failing school when he discovered he had a talent for decorating cakes. Now he has his sights set on attending a special cake decorating school in Chicago after he graduates.

Students can choose subjects diverse as interior design and advanced European history from Scotland High's rich curriculum menu. Still, about 40 percent of the students find nothing palatable and drop out before completing their four years.

— BILL GRAVES

Jamie Morrison, a 10th-grader at East Duplin High, trims boards with a band saw

Buses provide links to rural communities outside Southeast Halifax High School

Staff photo by Gene Hamm

State's rural schools lose community contact

By BILL GRAVES
Staff writer

The square, white buildings of Southeast Halifax High School rise stark and lonely amid the flat, plowed fields of rural North Carolina.

The school was built eight years ago on N.C. 125 about midway between Scotland Neck and Enfield, two of the principal communities it serves. In exchange for this larger, modern school, the towns gave up their smaller high schools, once spirited rivals.

But in trying to serve two communities, Southeast Halifax has become distant from both. In trying to make the school serve everybody, it serves nobody. Everyone — teachers, parents and students — must commute miles to reach it. Alone in the countryside, it seems out of place.

"We used to have community schools," said Kenneth E. Brantley, who recently retired as superintendent of Halifax County schools. "Each school was the center of the community. All the activities centered on that school. We lost that community support. It becomes nobody's school."

That has been a common story across Eastern North Carolina, where schools generally have the largest concentration of disadvantaged students, post the lowest test scores and have the fewest resources in the state.

Throughout this century, these poor rural school systems have been merging their small schools into bigger schools to save costs and offer students a broader choice of courses — in short, to become more like urban schools. But in doing so, they have become more impersonal, alienating parents and students.

Southeast Halifax High has trouble attracting residents to school functions because it is so isolated. Drama students must take their plays on the road to neighboring communities to get an audience.

Parent volunteers are rare. Ernest Smith, a program director with the state prison system, is trying to revive a Parent-Teacher Association that has been defunct for two years. But it is difficult to assemble parents, most of whom are single or working nights, he said.

The school also has trouble holding students. Of the 270 freshmen who entered the school in 1984, only 158 graduated four years later.

Halifax County has long been merging its small, community-based schools into larger schools that could offer students more courses at a lower price. At the end of World War II, the county had 65 schools, including 12 one-room school houses and eight high schools. Now it has 17 schools, including two high schools. Similar consolidations have occurred across the state.

In the early 1900s, North Carolina had about 7,200 schools. Today, about 2,000 schools serve five times as many students, according to a 500-page doctoral dissertation prepared in 1982 by Stephen M. Schewel, publisher of The Independent weekly newspaper in Durham.

Education leaders — saying large schools would cost less, offer more and better prepare rural students for the nation's industrial society — made big pushes for consolidating schools in the 1930s, after World War II and again in the 1960s.

In 1946, the 36 school systems with the largest numbers of poor students across rural Eastern North Carolina sent 172,000 students to 1,048 schools, 230 of which were single-room school houses. Today, those same systems serve 20,000 more students in 374 schools. Single-room schools have vanished.

Of the 36 poor systems in the state's coastal plain, 34 have only a single high school. Scotland High, for example, takes all 2,200 high school students in the county.

"We see a number of adjustment problems," said Sarah Hunter, a Scotland High counselor. "It is intimidating to come into a school of this size, particularly if one has come from a school of 200 kids."

Through consolidation, Eastern North Carolina schools have lost one of their biggest strengths — their smallness, said Dr. Jonathan P. Sher of Chapel Hill, a national expert on rural education and principal author of "Education in Rural America."

"They are just like urban schools, except they don't have the resource base to pull off that model of education," he said. "It is not that schools are deficient because they are rural. They are not rural schools."

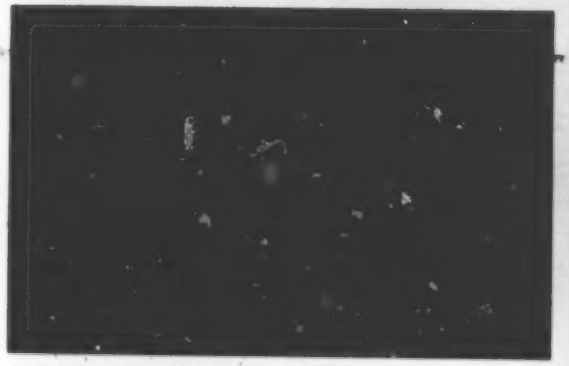
About one-fourth of the nation's school children attend rural schools, including about 1,000 one-room schools, said Joseph T. Newlin, executive director of the National Rural Education Association.

"What is characteristic of rural schools is strong parental involvement," he said.

But rural schools in Eastern North Carolina, because they serve such wide areas, have trouble generating community spirit or drawing help from parents, particularly when so many rank among the working poor.

At Inborden Elementary in Enfield, kindergarten teacher Susan B. Aspinwall said not one parent had showed up to speak with her on a day set aside for parent conferences.

Nearly 80 percent of Inborden's



Jerry Satterfield, a sixth-grader at Toler-Oak Hill School in Granville County, works on a computer

See SCHOOLS, page 10

Schools, community lose touch

Continued from page 9

students live with single mothers. Many of the mothers are young and unemployed and often have no cars or telephones. Last year, after teaching kindergarten for 17 years, Mrs. Aspinwall had the child of a former student enroll in her class.

Even when parents show strong interest in schools, their attention usually is divided, said Michael F. Williams, superintendent of Roanoke Rapids schools.

"There was a time when a community had a school and everyone in that community went to that school," he said. "Now you will find families in that community served by three and sometimes four schools."

Dr. Kenneth Newbold, temporary chief deputy to state schools Superintendent Bobby R. Etheridge, said those small community schools were not always as great as people remember. He recalls teaching 40 seventh-graders at Cordova Elementary in Richmond County while also trying to be principal with no secretary, no counselor and no librarian. Students frequently skipped school or were unruly, and many dropped out before high school, he said.

"I paddled 16 the first day I took over," said Dr. Newbold, who later was superintendent of Scotland County and Greensboro schools and now lives in Duplin County.

But the high school was the "social center" of the community, he said, "and the church and the home and the school were close-knit."

In recent years, a growing body of research suggests that students in small schools get more attention and are more likely to attend regularly, participate in activities and identify with the school community.

In a 1980 study of 14 special rural education projects for the U.S. Department of Education, Paul M. Nachtigal found small schools had smaller classes, more individual teaching and more student participation in school activities.

In his study of high schools in 77 rural school systems in North Carolina, Dr. Schewel found that school size had little effect on student achievement. Larger schools cost slightly less per pupil, he concluded, primarily because they have larger classes.

A recent survey by the Southern Growth Policies Board, an interstate compact based in Research Triangle Park, showed that smallness was a common feature among outstanding Southern schools, said Stuart A. Rosenfeld, deputy director. The most important strength of small schools, the board reported, lies in their ability to keep students from quitting.

Dr. Sher found as much in a recent study of schools in Nebraska. One in four students drops out of that state's large urban high schools, but only one in 10 leave Nebraska's many small rural high schools before graduating. The two largest schools districts accounted for more than half of Nebraska's 1,400 student dropouts in 1986-87. Dr. Sher found 93 small rural school districts that had no dropouts.

In contrast, each of the 38 poorest school systems in rural Eastern North Carolina lost students last year — about 3,800 dropouts in all.

At a time when families have become unstable for many rural students, a growing number of North Carolina administrators are seeing the merits of the more personal, nurturing community climate possible through small schools or schools within schools.

Teachers and administrators think smallness helped Gatesville School push the writing test scores of its 189 students higher than any county in the state, winning it recognition last year as a school of excellence by the U.S. Department of Education.

The school's writing campaign also produced two books — "Gee," published in 1985, and "Treasures to Behold," published in 1988 — that include a poem or short exposition from every student in the school.

Principal John A. Lane Jr. said that because his school is small, he could keep in continuous touch with his dozen teachers and find time to visit parents in their homes.

"There is not a child who attends this school who does not have a teacher who knows something about that child's parents and relatives," Mr. Lane said. "If this school has one strength, it is the fact that we communicate on a daily basis."

Gatesville School involves students, teachers, cooks and janitor in school projects. It takes advantage of its location by sending students on field trips to Williamsburg, Jamestown and the Lost Colony. And it draws students into educational endeavors such as a bookmark contest, reading incentive program, science fair and the production of a book.

But superintendents say it costs too much to build and operate small schools. The state, for example, provides one assistant principal for every 700 students, one secretary for every 500 students and one janitor for every 300 students. A school system would have to use local money to fill these positions in a school with fewer than 300 students.

Some large schools are exploring ways to divide their student bodies into more intimate communities. Scotland High School is considering the approach with its freshman class, said Ms. Hunter, the counselor.

At Enfield Middle School in Halifax County, Principal Claude E. Cooper has organized his 280 students into six groups he calls "houses." Each house has a name — such as the Stars, Bees, Explorers — and each has a section of classrooms that it can claim as its turf.

Students within each group spend most of their day together, sharing the same teachers, lunch periods and breaks. They are encouraged to decorate their territory, and the houses compete weekly in a quiz bowl.

Only one-third of these students live with two natural parents, and two-thirds live with guardians who are unemployed. Their test scores in general are low but have improved over the past two years, particularly in writing.

The Stars, the Bees and other groups eventually will ride buses up N.C. 125 through the countryside to Southeast Halifax High.

There they will be only freshmen.

There, nearly half of them will eventually become so lost that they will quit school. And there, hardly anyone in a high school that is isolated from its community will be around to notice. 12

Death of community schools

The declining number of local schools in Eastern North Carolina.

System	1945-46 Total schools	1945-46 One-room schools	1988-89 Total schools	1988-89 One-room schools
Halifax	65	12	17	0
Warren	45	9	9	0
Bertie	56	17	8	0
Robeson	73	21	27	0
Bladen	32	9	13	0
Columbus	40	9	17	0
Duplin	41	13	16	0
Gates	25	11	6	0
Edgecombe	48	8	10	0
Scotland	33	6	14	0
Total*	1048	230	374	0

* Includes 38 school systems in Eastern North Carolina.

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction

Rural teachers often do more for less pay

Last fall, you could buy your way into a basketball game at Enfield Middle School in Halifax County with a bag of pine straw. Teachers needed the straw to carry out one of their extra duties — landscaping.

Each teacher is responsible for clearing brush and weeds and planting shrubs and flowers on a section of grounds outside the 30-year-old brick school. Even Principal Claude E. Cooper works a section near the Dumpsters in back.

Because of scarce local resources, teachers often must do more for less pay in rural schools across Eastern North Carolina. This is one reason teachers are becoming scarce at a time when the state is offering rural schools more teaching positions.

More than anything else, low pay thwarts efforts of rural schools to attract teachers. In all but five of the state's 38 poorest Eastern rural school systems, teachers receive less than $500 in local supplements on top of their state base salaries.

Fourteen of those systems, including Duplin County, pay no supplement at all. Compare that to teachers who receive annual supplements of $8,643 in Wake County, $3,200 in Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and $3,980 in Greensboro.

Rural counties have depended heavily on their natives to staff their schools. For example, David E. Jordan graduated in 1954 from Charity Middle School in Rose Hill, where he is now principal. Counselor Janice B. Grady and teachers Stanley B. Gelbhaar, Judy D. Jackson and Larry E. Howard also grew up in Duplin County.

But many of these teachers are reaching retirement and fewer home-grown residents are coming back to replace them.

"We've probably had more leave due to retirement in the last three years than in the previous 10 years," said Kenneth Kennedy, principal of East Duplin High School near Beulaville.

Some school systems are struggling to find teachers. Northampton County scrambled this year to find a music teacher and is still searching for a French teacher.

Nearly all of Halifax County's high school math and science teachers were hired without teaching credentials through a program that allows college graduates to teach in their fields while they take education courses.

"We have a high turnover rate," said B. Maxwell Lancaster, assistant superintendent of instruction for Halifax County. "We spend most of our staff development money training new teachers every year. We have 66 people who are first- or second-year teachers out of 400 teachers."

As the state provides another 6,100 teaching positions through the eight-year Basic Education Program, its primary school reform effort, the rural teacher shortage likely will grow worse, educators say.

While some rural teachers work in modern schools, such as Southeast Halifax High or Warsaw Elementary, they more often are found in brick buildings that have been around 30 years or more.

Chowan County has not built a new school in nearly 40 years. Until recently, students in Elizabeth City were attending classes in U.S. Coast Guard hangars because one school building burned and two others were condemned, said Superintendent Travis W. Twiford Jr.

Of the 374 schools in the 38 poorest Eastern counties, 70 have not been accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Teachers sometimes dig into their own pockets for supplies. At Warsaw Elementary School in Duplin County, fourth-grade teacher Claudia J. Hollingsworth each year spends about $800 to $900 of her own money on instructional materials the school system cannot afford.

Rural schools have shoddier buildings and fewer supplies than city schools largely because they are unable to raise as much local money. Rural residents, however, often make a greater effort than city taxpayers to support schools, according to a recent study by the Public School Forum of North Carolina in Raleigh.

Two-thirds of the state's poorest 38 Eastern rural systems are among the third of the state's school systems making the greatest effort to support education. The Wake County and Charlotte-Mecklenburg school systems, by contrast, rank among the third making the least effort.

Wake County has a per capita income of $16,606 and property values worth $359,496 per pupil. That is about double the resources Warren County can tap with a per capita income of $8,672 and property base of $163,998 per pupil.

So with less effort, Wake County can raise twice as much local funds — $937 per student compared to $445 per student for Warren County. That difference means that Wake County has about $12,200 more per class or $285,200 per school to spend.

While the BEP gives poor rural schools the needed teachers, courses and supplies they never could afford before, it gives those same resources to rich schools. So while the poor become less poor, the rich get richer and the gulf between them remains.

And Enfield still collects pine straw at ball games.

— BILL CRAVEN

Fundamental changes advocated for schools

By BILL GRAVES
Staff writer

Facing a stream of school failure that runs especially wide and deep across Eastern North Carolina, educators are concluding that schools must fundamentally change the ways they teach students and involve parents.

"We've always done pretty well by a certain set of kids; they are statistically white, middle- to upper-income, from stable homes and reasonably self-motivated," said Gene Causby, executive director of the N.C. School Boards Association. "We've never done well the more you deviate from that norm."

And in the state's poorest rural eastern schools, fewer and fewer students fit that norm. Schools in this region have the largest proportion of disadvantaged students, post the lowest test scores and receive the least amount of money from government.

Some policy makers believe the state must give these schools more, and few educators disagree. But they say money alone will not rescue most of the foundering students — schools also must change the way they teach.

Toler-Oak Hill School in Granville County, where three out of four students come from low-income families, has ventured into what many education leaders see as the promised land for troubled rural schools.

Two years ago, the General Assembly freed the school from state regulations and gave it authority to use its resources however it saw fit. The same freedom was granted to five other schools in Granville, Stanly and Haywood counties.

Teachers at Toler-Oak Hill — a 300-student school four miles south of the Virginia line — moved on two fronts. They revamped their school so it centered on students.

The teachers organized themselves into teams, one for teachers in preschool through grade four and another for teachers in grades five through eight. Each team chose its own "lead teacher," an instructor who teaches in the morning and spends the afternoon helping her team develop new instructional approaches and materials.

They dissolved boundaries separating grades and reworked schedules to fit each student's needs. So Debbie M. Mertz, a lead teacher, has Rhonda in her third-grade classroom for English, but sends her to a fourth-grade group for reading. And Mrs. Mertz might have second-graders and fourth-graders in her third-grade reading group.

The school used some of its federal remedial funds to buy a sophisticated computer system offering 30 courses in reading, writing and mathematics. Every student spends 30 minutes a day in the computer laboratory.

Teachers work together to integrate lessons in different subjects, so a word that surfaces in social studies might also be a spelling word in reading. Spelling textbooks have been tossed and textbooks in general are used less in favor of other activities.

Innovation begets innovation. Laura W. Elliott has revamped the way she teaches arithmetic in her combined kindergarten and first-grade class because of progress they are making on the computer.

"They were so far ahead of me, I wanted to keep up with them," Mrs. Elliott said.

During daily math, Mrs. Elliott rotates her students among eight stations where they explore math in an ever-changing variety of concrete ways. While a group at one table weighs a roll of tape on a scale, students at another are identifying fractions in geometric shapes.

The school is exploiting strengths of individual teachers, allowing them to teach topics they are especially interested in. Science teacher Vernita G. Comer, for example, offers a special biology course that gives seventh- and eighth-graders a chance to peer at one-celled animals under microscopes and to dissect earthworms, grasshoppers and frogs. "They love it," she said.

Teachers bring in an outside observer from the central office to watch and advise them on ways to improve their teaching. A consultant from Appalachian State University also makes regular visits to the school to offer advice.

To get parents more involved in their children's education, teachers visited 94 of the school's parents at home this year. Mrs. Mertz and Lula V. Wagstaff, the upper-grade lead teacher, have begun teaching basic skills two nights a week to 36 adults, some of whom are working for a high school diploma. Many of these are parents learning in the same computer lab their children use during the day.

Teacher Laura W. Elliott helps kindergartners Valorie Taylor and Robin Wilkerson at math work station

School becomes model

Toler-Oak Hill is not the same school it was three years ago, said G. Thomas Houlihan, superintendent of Granville County schools. Before, it was a very typical Eastern North Carolina rural school loaded with students falling behind and with teachers resigned to the probability that these students would never catch up. Residents frowned on the school as one of the worst in the county with low test scores and low student attendance.

Today, Toler-Oak Hill has become a county model. Three years ago, only 33 percent of the sixth-graders scored at a mastery level on the state writing test. Last year, as eighth-graders, 80 percent of them scored at or above that level, giving the school the highest writing scores in the county.

Student scores on the standardized California Achievement Test also are beginning to climb, exceeding the county average at some grade levels. Many months, the school has the highest student attendance rate in the county. Students on average have improved their reading and mathematical ability by two grades in the year they have had access to computers, teachers say.

See EDUCATORS, page 12

Officials may alter schools to fit needs of students

Jonathan P. Sher of Chapel Hill compares a typical state school system to a system of taxis, buses and subways in which about a third of the riders get lost and never reach their destinations.

A city facing this dilemma logically would repair the system rather than force riders to become more successful commuters, said Dr. Sher, a nationally recognized expert on rural schools and editor and principal author of "Education in Rural America."

But most education reforms in North Carolina have tried to change students to fit an inadequate system, he said. Given the failures of that approach, Dr. Sher sees promise in a movement gaining national momentum to reshape the educational system so it better suits students getting lost.

This approach, commonly called school restructuring, makes student progress the focus of everything that happens in school. Students typically are put into smaller, more personal groups or "schools within schools" and teachers are given more authority over how the school operates.

The N.C. School Boards Association and teachers across the country have become interested in a German school that has been widely publicized by the American Federation of Teachers as a model of what restructuring can lead to.

The school, Koln-Holweide in Cologne, West Germany, serves 2,600 students in grades five through 13. About one in four of its students have unemployed parents, many have single parents, and one in three are foreign, the majority Turkish. Yet the school has only a 1 percent dropout rate, high attendance, and 60 percent of its students score high enough on high school exit exams to enter college.

The school keeps students from becoming lost by putting them into smaller groups in each of which a team of about six teachers are responsible for three subgroups of about 30 students. Students and teachers stay together for six years, getting to know each other well.

Further, students are assigned to smaller "table groups" of about five or six students who they study with daily for a year or more.

Teachers eat with their students, counsel them, set their class schedules, and talk with their parents. They make all instructional decisions, including how the curriculum will be taught, scheduling, and staff training. They, in essence, organize and run their school within the larger school.

This approach might hold promise for the large number of disadvantaged students struggling academically in the rural schools of Eastern North Carolina, said E. Eugene Causby, executive director of the state School Boards Association.

The association is exploring the merits of reorganizing the school day so teachers concentrate on core subjects from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Through the afternoon until 5 p.m., students could choose such enrichment courses as dance, music and art being provided by the Basic Education Program, the state's eight-year school improvement initiative.

This would extend the school day at little or no extra cost with two shifts of teachers, give each shift more planning time, and eliminate teachers' efforts to cram all the BEP offers into a 5½-hour day, Dr. Causby said.

One of the aims of restructuring schools should be to make them more relevant to the world modern children grow up in, educators say. As it is, students see little connection between what they learn at school and what they see everywhere else.

Schools even operate by a different calendar and clock than the workaday world, said Rodney J. Hassler, who oversees most of the vocational programs at the 2,200-student Scotland High School in Laurinburg.

"We are like a big castle with a moat," Mr. Hassler said. "We are totally devoid of the rest of the community."

Mr. Hassler says he believes schools need to begin speaking a language students can relate to — money. They must expose students earlier to their career options and the salaries that go with them, he said.

Through a non-profit group he founded called North Carolina REAL Enterprises, Dr. Sher also is helping schools prepare rural students to carve out jobs where they live.

"What we are going to have to get serious about is economic growth from within," Dr. Sher said. "You can't keep expecting outside sources to rescue North Carolina from its economic plight."

– BILL GRAVES

State education plan alone will not repair rural schools

North Carolina's Basic Education Program is increasing school spending, morale and course offerings in rural schools across Eastern North Carolina, but it has yet to boost student achievement.

Some educators say it never will.

Jonathan P. Sher of Chapel Hill, a nationally recognized expert on rural schools, said the state's primary eight-year effort to improve its schools only enhances a system that fails to work for large numbers of students. Even after the BEP is fully funded, he said, "we'll find the same fundamental problems plaguing schools."

The state has increased annual spending on its public schools by nearly $1 billion in the last four years, and will boost it by another $400 million before the BEP is fully funded in 1995. Still, students in the poorest school systems of Eastern North Carolina continue to have the lowest test scores in the state.

Research shows that the wealth and education levels of parents have more influence on a student's achievement than any other factor, including resources.

Still, because of the BEP, music flows through the dim halls of old elementary schools in Halifax County for the first time.

On one December morning at Inborden Elementary in Enfield, V. Anne Morton shows eager fourth-graders the difference between a violin and a viola, then sings "Jolly Old St. Nicholas" as they accompany her on their plastic recorders.

Ms. Morton, a first-year music teacher, moves fast. She has only 30 minutes and other classes to visit. Each week she teaches 1,200 students in 47 classrooms at three schools in Halifax County.

Although her visits are brief and her lessons brisk, she has buoyed spirits in Halifax County. Across town, a part-time social worker has begun showing up at Enfield Middle School, which takes more than 200 of its 300 students from impoverished homes.

Halifax County school system could not afford to provide music teachers, social workers and other members of its staff without the BEP.

Some rural teachers, however, say they worry the BEP might be hindering their work by making their daily schedule too full and busy. Others say the Standard Course of Study, the state curriculum provided through the BEP, requires them to cover so much that their lessons lack depth.

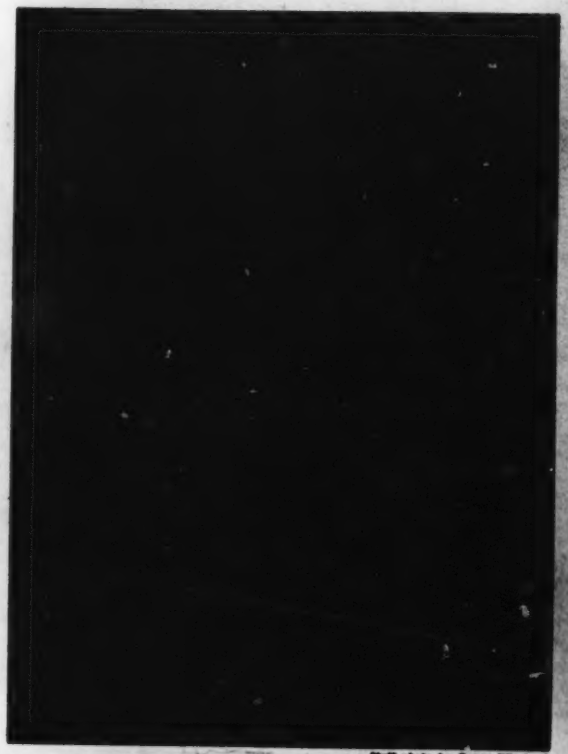
Suellen Stanley said she no longer has enough time with her first-graders at Pate-Gardner Primary in Gibson because they are gone so often to such courses as physical education, Spanish, library, art and music.

"I worry they are not getting everything they need as far as their math and reading," Ms. Stanley said. "To me, you have got to have that. Some days we don't have time for it."

Still, most educators, including Dr. Sher, agree that rural schools, which have been traditionally neglected, need more than they have. Scheduling problems with the BEP will be ironed out, administrators say, while the resources it offers ultimately can only help.

"The BEP is not going to guarantee high test scores, but I honestly believe it will increase the chance of it happening," said Travis W. Twiford Jr., school superintendent of Pasquotank County. "If we don't do something like the BEP, nothing will change."

— BILL GRAVES



Staff photo by Roger Winstead

Delores Hallowell, a teacher at Gatesville Elementary School, checks a student's progress during a quiz

Educators offer fundamental changes for schools

Continued from page 11

Parents are again involved in the school. Parent and community volunteers have grown from about five two years ago to 60 this year. On a day set aside for parent conferences this year, Mrs. Mertz met with parents of 80 percent of her students. Three years ago, the turnout was about 30 percent.

By involving parents and by allowing teachers to be architects in school restructuring, Toler-Oak Hill embodies school reform objectives advocated by a growing number of educators in North Carolina and across the nation.

A call for "fundamental restructuring of schools" is the central recommendation of 77 business, education and government leaders assembled last year by the Public School Forum of North Carolina.

Bobby R. Etheridge, state superintendent of public instruction and a member of the Forum, advocates restructuring, stressing it must start in the school rather than the statehouse.

No statewide plan can force schools to reorganize as Toler-Oak Hill has, but steps can be taken to encourage such changes. And without some changes in state rules — such as those governing spending, class size and textbooks — schools do not have the local authority to restructure.

The state superintendent, the Forum, the state's two largest teacher groups, and various other education associations are urging legislators to give local school systems more freedom from state regulations so they can experiment with new approaches. In return for more autonomy, teachers would be held responsible for showing that their students reach acceptable achievement levels.

Parents get involved

Even with these changes, educators say, schools will need to make at least one other major change — they must show parents why education matters. Parents of a majority of Eastern North Carolina's children rank among the working poor. They work long hours and late shifts; many are single, and many didn't finish high school.

Many do not have the time, the energy or the ability to help their children with homework. Many of the parents see school as a forbidding place where they met failure and rejection. Helping them see the importance of education poses a major challenge for rural educators.

In one experiment to meet that challenge, parents are going to school with their 3- and 4-year-old children at four schools in Vance, Cumberland, Madison, and New Hanover counties. The program was designed and pioneered in Kentucky by Sharon K. Darling of Louisville.

Three days a week, about 20 young mothers who never finished high school learn about reading, math and parenting while their young children get an early start in school.

The experiment, called the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project, is supervised by Dr. Darling and supported by a $732,000 grant from the William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust administered in Chapel Hill.

Mr. Etheridge agrees that schools must build stronger ties with parents and communities. Toward that end, he said, he will soon outline a statewide plan to recruit parents, civic groups and businesses to volunteer for tutoring and assisting teachers in their schools.

And teachers need to understand that all students can learn, said Dr. Houlihan. Toler-Oak Hill would never have changed if teachers did not come to accept that, he said. Like many teachers across rural Eastern North Carolina, Mrs. Wagstaff, one of the lead teachers, needed to be converted, as would many teachers across Eastern North Carolina.

"I was one of those people who felt there were some students who would never do but so much," Mrs. Wagstaff said. "This year and last year I have changed my whole philosophy of teaching.

"I feel like every child can make progress."

About the reporters, editor

The series on rural schools in Eastern North Carolina was reported and written primarily by Bill Graves and edited by Tim Simmons.

Graves

Simmons

Mr. Graves, who covers public schools, has been with The News and Observer since 1988. He holds a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Wash., and a master's degree in English from Western Washington State University. He taught English for 3½ years in rural high schools in Washington and Oregon.

Also writing for the series was Judy Bolch, a special assignments reporter who has worked for The N&O and The Raleigh Times for 11 years, much of that as editor of the Home section. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from Winthrop College and a master's degree in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Mr. Simmons, who joined the newspaper in 1987, is an assistant metropolitan editor who supervises reporters who cover public and higher education. He holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from Michigan State University.